



CARTER G. WOODSON FOUNDATION

A Study Guide for Teachers

THE GOSPEL SOUND: Songs of Praise and Worship

The word Gospel means "Good News", and refers to the Good News about Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Christian faith.

Gospel music is a type of sacred music that originated in the Black Church. The roots of Gospel music are found in another type of African American sacred music, the Spirituals. The Spirituals were created during slavery and were a combination of the musical traditions of West Africa, Protestant hymns, and stories from the Bible. These songs were very emotional and often very sad. They expressed the religious beliefs of African Americans as well as their feelings about slavery and their yearnings for freedom.

Like the Spirituals, Gospel music is also about religious faith and the social conditions of African Americans. One scholar, Tony Heilbut, has described it as "good news in bad times." But in contrast to the Spirituals, Gospel music is more joyful and upbeat.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey is considered the "Father of Gospel Music." Dorsey was born in 1899 in Villa Rica, Georgia near Atlanta. He was the son of a Baptist preacher, and it was in the church that he developed his talent to play the organ and piano and compose music. As a young man Dorsey also displayed his musical abilities in the entertainment world where he played piano and wrote songs for legendary blues singers such as Bessie Smith.

Dorsey eventually stopped working in the entertainment world. As Rev. Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker explains in his book *Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change*, "The religious influences of Dorsey's early life were persistent, and after a serious illness he devoted his life to religious composition, beginning with 'If I Don't Get There' in 1921." As Walker goes on to add, "Gospel music was born of Dorsey's early religious life ... combined with his experience in the blues-jazz world. In its simplest form Gospel music became a social comment within a religious context, and its musical vehicle was the beat and syncopation of what was known as 'worldly' music, coupled with the spontaneity common to all Black music."



Thomas A. Dorsey — "The Father of Gospel Music"

Songs of Praise and Worship

Thus, in the 1920s when Dorsey combined words appropriate for sacred music with the sounds of secular music, he brought forth a new kind of music. At first, some people didn't like Gospel music because it sounded like the blues, which churchgoers often referred to as "the devil's music." But Dorsey, who eventually composed over 400 gospel songs, and others who believed in the gospel sound continued to promote this new music, and by the 1930s it had caught on and became an important part of African American church services.

As Gospel music became more accepted various gospel singers and groups began to make records and hold concerts in churches, in colleges, private clubs, and various public places. Some of the most famous gospel performers of the past were Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, and the quartet, the Dixie Hummingbirds.

Gospel music falls into two basic categories: Historic and Contemporary. Historic Gospel refers to the older songs from the 1920s to the 1950s. Although they were sometimes based on Protestant hymns such as "Amazing Grace," these songs mainly took their lyrics from field and work songs of slavery and used colloquial speech. One of the most popular historic gospel songs is Dorsey's "Take My Hand, Precious Lord."

Contemporary gospel, also called modern Gospel, appeared on the scene around the 1960s. These songs contain more elements of classical European musical traditions and less colloquial speech, and they include new compositions as well as updated versions of older gospel songs. Two of the most popular contemporary gospel

songs are "O Happy Day" composed by Edwin Hawkins and "Lord, Help Me to Hold Out" by James Cleveland. Other well known contemporary gospel singers are Andrae Crouch and The Winans.

Today, contemporary gospel and historic gospel thrive side by side, and both come in many styles and forms. The tempo can be fast or slow, the performers range from soloists to choirs, and the music can come from a variety of instruments including piano, organ, electric guitar, saxophone, drums, and tambourine.

One of the main features of Gospel music is improvisation. This means that during a performance, the singers will often create new lyrics, repeat lines, and make other changes and additions to the song. This usually happens when the audience encourages the performers to continue singing by singing along, humming along, clapping, body movements, and offering up shouts of "Amen!"

Gospel music has had a great impact on "soul" music, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll. This happened because many popular entertainers past and present such as Otis Redding, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Gladys Knight and Aretha Franklin began their singing careers in the church. When these singers began to sing secular songs, they used the rhythms and style of Gospel music.

Although it was created by African Americans and is primarily considered the sacred music of the Black Church, today Gospel music is performed by people of different faiths. Gospel music has a wide appeal because it speaks of strength in times of trouble and great hope for better times in the near and distant future.



Before The Performance

Explain to your students that Gospel music is one type of sacred music of the Christian faith that originated in the Black Church in the early 1920s. Tell them that Gospel music was influenced by another African American style of music, the blues, and that it has, in turn, had a great influence on today's secular music.

After The Performance

1. Discuss with your students what the songs were about.
2. Discuss with your students how the different songs made them feel.
3. Discuss with your students in what ways the songs were alike and different.



Ask your students the following questions

1. What did you like most about the gospel songs? (Possible answers: the lyrics, the beat, the instruments, the performers)
2. Did these songs remind you of any other types of songs?
3. What did the performers do to make the songs more enjoyable? (Possible answers: body gestures and movement, encouraging audience participation)
4. What is your favorite kind of music and how is it similar to or different from Gospel music?



Follow-up Activities

1. Have students write their own songs about a message they would like the world to hear.
2. Provide students with photographs of various gospel singers and listen to recordings of their songs. Afterwards, have students draw pictures that show what the songs made them think about or feel.
3. Have students do research on another type of music. Tell them that their research should include reading about the music form as well as listening to an example of it. Have them prepare an oral report for an up-coming session in which they discuss what this music is like and some of the famous people who perform it. They should also discuss how this music is similar to or different from Gospel music. Possible types of music are:

Jazz

Opera

Rock and Roll

Hymns

Rap music

Country and Western

Folk songs of other cultures

Sacred music of other faiths

Post Test

1. What is Gospel music?
2. Who is Thomas A. Dorsey and what did he do?
3. Name four gospel songs?
4. Name four famous gospel singers?
5. What things do gospel songs talk about?
6. What other kind of music sounds like Gospel music?
7. What is the difference between sacred and secular music?
8. What are the effects Gospel music can have on people?
9. Can people who are not Christians enjoy Gospel music? If so, why?
10. How has your knowledge of Gospel music affected your feelings about music in general?
11. What has your knowledge of Gospel music taught you about African American culture?



New Words

BLUES	A style of music created by African Americans in the late 1800s which usually has a slow tempo and is often about sad times and experiences.
LYRICS	The words of a song.
CHOIR	A large organized group of singers.
COLLOQUIAL	Characteristic of ordinary, informal speech.
COMPOSE	To write the music and lyrics of a song.
IMPROVISE	To create or perform on the spur of the moment.
QUARTET	An organized group of four singers or musicians.
SACRED	Devoted to or dedicated for religious purpose.
SECULAR	Not pertaining to or connected with religion.
SOLOIST	A person who sings or performs alone.
SYNCOPIATION	The stressing of the beat that is normally not stressed.
TEMPO	The rate of speed of a musical work



New Books

The following may be helpful resources:

Black American Music by Hildred Roach (Crescendo Publishing, 1973)

The Gospel Sound by Tony Heilbut (Simon & Schuster, 1971)

The Music of Black Americans by Eileen Southern (W.W. Norton, 1971)

The Negro and His Music by Alain Locke (Arno Press, 1969)

Somebody's Calling My Name by Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker (Judson Press, 1979)

The Soul of Black Worship by Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker (Martin Luther King Fellows Press, 1984)

"An Analysis of His Contributions: Thomas A. Dorsey, 'Father of Gospel Music'" by Horace C. Boyer and "An interview with Thomas A. Dorsey" by Alfred Duckett (*Black World*, vol. 23, no. 9, July 1974)

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The mission of the Woodson Foundation is to research, preserve, perpetuate and celebrate the creative expressions, the cultural heritage, and the historic achievements of African Americans through performances, exhibits and educational activities.